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## THE STUDY CLUB

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### BRYANT'S "TO A WATERFOWL"

For the high-school student beginning his work in American verse Bryant's *To a Waterfowl* offers an easy and interesting introduction to matters of literary appreciation. Consequently I have chosen to set down in somewhat dogmatic form some of the chief points which may be emphasized in the study of this poem and which may later serve as rough but pertinent suggestions for helping the pupils in studying other pieces of verse.

1. What, if anything, do we gain from the history of the composition of this poem? In this case the obvious answer is that we gain much. On the fifteenth of December, 1815, Bryant, who had just come of age, walked the seven miles from Cummington to Plainfield where he thought to begin his practice of the law. Tired, far from well, anxious for the future, he saw in the opal depths of the evening sky a solitary bird winging its way. "He watched the live wanderer till it was lost in the distance, asking himself whither it had come and to what home it was flying. Reaching the home where he was to stay for the night, his mind was still full of what he had seen and felt, and he wrote these lines."

2. What is the effect of the metrical form here chosen? Roughly speaking, we may say that the metrical form has for the reader of verse something of the significance which the signature of a piece of music bears for the musician. Poetry is the sister of music and obviously gains no small part of its beauty and charm from its surge and rhythm. Here, as is quite customary with Bryant, the metrical movement is simple, the most notable feature being the somewhat unusual structure of the stanza with its effective variation in the length of the lines. This effectiveness may be impressed upon the class by the antiphonal reading of the four lines of this first stanza.

3. One of the chief values of poetry lies in its suggestiveness; the fringe of suggestions may be, at times, even more valuable than the core of meaning. Of the many such phrases marking this poem one of the most notable is "the last steps of day" which brings to mind the Old World beliefs of the progress over the heavens of the sun, the inception of which is portrayed so wonderfully in Guido Reni's "Aurora."

4. Watch for variant readings of different passages, for these often afford us a momentary glance into the building of the poem, throw interesting and suggestive flashes of light on the poet's art, and offer us a better conception of the man back of the poem. Such an instance is found in Bryant's reply to Dana's comments on the reading of a line in the second stanza of the *Waterfowl*:

In regard to the change . . . in which the line now stands—

“As darkly seen against the crimson sky,”

instead of

“As darkly painted on the crimson sky,”

please read what I have to say in excuse. I was never satisfied with the word “painted,” because the next line is—

“Thy figure floats alone.”

Now from a very early period . . . there seemed to me an incongruity between the idea of a figure painted on the sky and a figure moving “floating” across its face. If the figure were painted, then it would be fixed. The incongruity distressed me, and I could not be easy until I had made the change. I preferred a plain prosaic expression to a picturesque one which seemed to me false.

5. Well chosen adjectives give life to pictures. Notice the adjectives in the first two stanzas descriptive of the sunset. Study the unusually fine choice of adjectives in the third stanza, each carrying its vivid touch of suggestion. Do not hesitate to link these closely with scenes familiar to the student and to help him realize that beauty and significance are not far off, distant things but that they lie at our doors.

6. Watch for fine lines or phrases. Sometimes these lines may put a thought in final perfect form; sometimes they may catch a picture in a phrase; or, again, they may be magical with music. Whenever we meet such a line, let us return thanks to Apollo and make it our own. Throughout this poem Bryant repeatedly suggests the boundless ranges of the sky in such phrases as “the abyss of heaven,” “rosy depths,” “far height,” etc.; but the suggestiveness and beauty of “the desert and illimitable air” make it, in the opinion of many critics, by far the loveliest and most memorable line of the poem. Pupils always gain an added interest in this line when they have heard the familiar story of how Matthew Arnold and Hartley Coleridge enjoyed this poem together, and how Arnold listened to his friend repeating this lovely line. By skilfully exposing a class to such lines and phrases, by setting these singing in that tantalizing and unescapable fashion of which they are

capable, one may capitalize to good advantage much of the energy which is now wasted on such songs as "Mister Moving Man, Don't Take Ma Baby Grand."

7. Has the poet made especially effective use of alliteration? As children all of us were interested in repeating the lines about "Peter Piper" and the "big black bug." The wise poet, however, does not drench us in this fashion with alliteration, but skilfully presents to us beautiful combinations of sounds, or through the repetition of a sound suggests the idea he would convey. Thus in "fanned at that far height the cool thin atmosphere" we catch in the surge of the alliteration a suggestion of the beating of the bird's wings.

8. Watch for key words. Occasionally the gist of an entire stanza is centered in some strategic word. To capture the force of this word is to apprehend the significance of the entire stanza. Such a key word is "soon," in the sixth stanza, with its fine embodiment of our never-ceasing aspiration for the ideal and our struggle toward it. Goethe has expressed beautifully this same idea and ideal in his familiar little *Nachtlied* with its simple yet powerful close. "Soon thou too shalt find rest."

9. What is the golden text of the poem? Perhaps in the classroom discussion this question may well come first, since from the central thought embodied in the last stanza grew the whole poem. Here, naturally, the class may be led to consider under what circumstances a moral is a legitimate part of a poem, to contrast the manner in which the moral is appended to Bryant's *The Yellow Violet* with that in which it has been woven into the very warp and woof of this poem. Here is a nineteenth-century embodiment of the beautiful old lesson of the five sparrows sold for two farthings "and not one of them forgotten before God." We need not make the moral the text for a sermon, but we shall fall short of our highest possibilities in teaching this poem if its lesson does not sink deeply into our pupils' hearts.

After this discussion must come the final re-reading of the poem, with the increased appreciation and enjoyment that attend an enlarged understanding of it; for, say what we will about the blossoms of literature, understanding and appreciation ever advance hand in hand.

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